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Can ecotourism deliver real economic, social, and environmental benefits? A study of the Osa Peninsula, Costa Rica

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Abstract

Doubt persists about ecotourism's ability to make tangible contributions to conservation and deliver benefits for host communities. This work in Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula tests the hypothesis that ecotourism in this region is more effective at improving well-being for local residents, at enhancing their access to key resources and information, and at supporting biodiversity conservation than other locally available economic sectors. Data from 128 semi-structured interviews with local workers, both in ecotourism and in other occupations, together with associated research, indicate that ecotourism offers the best currently available employment opportunities, double the earnings of other livelihoods, and other linked benefits. Locally, ecotourism is viewed as the activity contributing most to improvements in residents' quality of life in the Osa Peninsula and to increased levels of financial and attitudinal support for parks and environmental conservation. Ecolodge ownership by local people is substantial, and

many local ecotourism workers plan to launch their own businesses. The data offer a convincing rebuttal to arguments that ecotourism does little to address poverty or disparities in access to resources and equally rebuts claims that ecotourism is simply a part of the “neoliberal conservation toolkit” that cannot help but exacerbate the very inequalities it purports to address.

Abstract

Ecotourism has been widely promoted as a sustainable development strategy that can help to conserve biodiversity and generate income for local communities. However, there is growing concern that ecotourism may be a form of neoliberal conservation that serves the interests of the state and the tourism industry, rather than the local community. This study examines the impact of ecotourism on the local community in Costa Rica, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The study finds that ecotourism has had a positive impact on the local community, but that it is also a form of neoliberal conservation that serves the interests of the state and the tourism industry. The study concludes that ecotourism can be a sustainable development strategy, but only if it is managed in a way that benefits the local community and conserves biodiversity.

Keywords:

- ecotourism
- community development
- conservation
- tourism impacts
- Costa Rica
- Osa Peninsula

References:

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All authors share an interest in the use of tourism to stimulate biodiversity conservation and alleviate poverty in Latin America.

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